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Cathy Cohen
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Death and Rebirth of a Movement: Queering Critical Ethnic Studies

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THE AUTHOR GAVE THIS TALK AS PART OF THE QUEERING ETHNIC STUDIES PLENARY session at the "Critical Ethnic Studies and the Future of Genocide" conference, which was held at the University of California, Riverside, on March 10 to 12, 2011. The queering of the analysis of violence against youth is rooted in an understanding of violence that flows from projects that pathologize and brutalize youth regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality. Social justice organizations such as Gender JUST, FIERCE, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and Queers for Economic Justice exemplify queer organizations that reject challenges to violence based on rights-based, individualistic approaches requiring special attention to LGBTQ[1] victims and calling for criminalizing hate crime legislation and campus anti-bullying policies. Similar to other models of accountability explored in this issue, their remedies to violence must echo critiques and responses that reject the individualizing and criminalizing framework of the conventional anti-sexual assault and domestic violence movement. Instead, they call for a collective, community accountability response to state and intra-community violence.

On September 24, 2009, Derrion Albert, a 16-year-old black honor roll student in Chicago, Illinois, was brutally beaten to death on his way home from school. We know the specifics of Derrion's brutal murder because it was captured on a cell phone video seen around the world. It appeared on the broadcast media and was posted on Internet sites such as YouTube. In the video, a group of black boys and young men repeatedly hit Derrion with a board and then stomped on him while he was on the ground.

All reports of his murder frame Derrion as an innocent victim. He was described as a "Grandmomma's boy" who "loved wrestling, basketball, and shopping." In his mother's words, "he was a great kid, a good student." She recounts that she and Derrion "were getting ready to start a plan for college."[2] He did not belong to a gang and seemed to have no connection to the young men who assaulted him with fists and boards. Some did attend the same school as he did. On that day, they were fighting on the path he used to travel home from school.

* **Cathy Cohen** is the David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* (Oxford University Press) and *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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The video of Derrion Albert's killing is horrifying and revolting to watch. A splintered wooden plank brutally strikes what appears to be the back of his head until he is knocked unconscious. He sustains another blow as his body hits the hard concrete on the ground. When he regains consciousness and tries to get up, he is again punched in the face and hit with another wooden board. Finally, his limp body sinks to the ground for the last time, with the individuals surrounding him delivering kicks and stomps. One imagines the physical and emotional pain Derrion endured on his normal route home, confused and blindsided by such violence at the hands of individuals with whom he had no fundamental tie.

The images and sounds encasing this gloomy event are equally troubling. Cars blow their horns at kids fighting in the street. Too scared or perhaps unconcerned, drivers refuse to stop and try desperately to make their way through the conflict. Young black men, some without shirts, fight one another with fists and boards, intent on hurting those they perceive as enemies. As the short, devastating video ends, other young black faces cry out for someone to help their friend Derrion. They beg him, "Derrion, get up, please!" Unfortunately, their help came too late.[3]

This recounting of Derrion Albert's death raises critical questions for me about the project and possibility of a re-imagined queer politics. Moving beyond marriage and the military, it centers issues such as violence and someone like Derrion Albert in our considerations, theories, and actions. Given the current landscape of LGBTQ politics, it is not surprising when even those who espouse queer political commitments push back against the inclusion of Derrion Albert in the queer diaspora. Insistently, they ask: Was he queer?

I often encounter push back, probably appropriately, from friends and colleagues. They suggest that I am stretching the concept of queer too far or using it incorrectly with respect to Derrion. His attackers are another matter, for they could be said to be engaging in violent behavior as a way to perform a dysfunctional hyper-masculinity, with analyses of masculinity falling within the purview of queer theory.

It is a much easier leap for those of us thinking about death, race, and queer studies/politics to marshal a different, more traditional black body to mark the intersection. For example, about six months before Derrion's killing, 11-year-old Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, an African-American boy, hung himself on April 6, 2009, because of the bullying and homophobia he endured at school.

On "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," Carl's mother said that he was a wonderful young man "who loved life, a boy scout and an entrepreneur in the making," who took his own life because of taunts from other kids that he was gay.[4] In many ways, Carl fits our understanding of who can be the face of queer politics. A more traditional queer politics might be more "comfortable" incorporating the killing of young Sakia Gunn—a black lesbian killed in Newark, New Jersey, after rejecting the sexual advances of her killer—into our analyses of LGBT and queer politics, than we would be incorporating Derrion Albert.

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For me, Derrion's death is deeply connected to the suicide of Carl Walker-Hoover and the killing of Sakia Gunn, but not because of his sexual practice, identity, or performance. He, Carl, Sakia, and other young folks of color operate in the world as queer subjects, the targets of racial normalizing projects intent on pathologizing across the dimensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. By normalizing their degradation, marginalization, and invisibility, it becomes something to which we no longer pay attention.

A traditional reading of queer theory, one committed to a subjectless, white, sexual practice and post-identity analysis (along the lines detailed and critiqued by scholars such as Jose Muñoz or Jack Halberstam), does not easily allow connections to be made between Derrion and Carl. In radical queer theory and a politics of people of color, the queering of, and connection between, Derrion and Carl is inescapable and the rebirth of queer politics becomes possible.

In October 2010, about a year after Derrion Albert's death, the physical and emotional violence that LGBTQ youth endure was made visible in a series of highly publicized stories on suicides by gay and queer youth. As evidence of the radicalizing potential of a queer politics rooted in the lives of folks of color, it pushed beyond a one-dimensional focus on sex as the marker of queerness and demanded a comprehensive analysis.

The liberal apparatus of the gay and lesbian community leveraged its power to mount a response to the most recent crisis of suicides. Its message stressed the need for better, tougher hate crime legislation, new legislation mandating antidiscrimination policies on college campuses, and the recognition of cyber-bullying as a form of harassment. Meanwhile, small groups of progressive, queer activists, many of color in groups such as Gender JUST, FIERCE, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and Queers for Economic Justice, refused to have the violence they experience divorced from the systemic violence that Derrion Albert and other young folks of color endure daily. They, too, saw and articulated the queer connection between Derrion and Carl, between a traditional queer theory and a more intersectional theory and politics rooted in the lives of folks of color.

That analysis directly challenges the liberal, rights-based agenda that dominates LGBTQ politics today. These activists refused to collaborate on a project that addresses violence through a framework in which the unit of analysis is individuals whose behavior is labeled as bullying or a hate crime. Doing so ignores the need for a system-level response to the collective and systemic violence against marginalized communities, whether they are black and/or queer.

Law professor and trans activist Dean Spade articulates the problems with the liberal LGBTQ agenda, which is committed to a rights-based approach to violence, especially through hate crime laws. In Spade's view,

> The logic of visibility and inclusion surrounding antidiscrimination and hate crime law campaigns is very popular; yet there are many troubling

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> limitations to the idea that these two reforms compose a proper approach to problems trans people face in both criminal and civil law contexts.... Hate crime laws, specifically, have never been argued to have a deterrent effect. They focus on punishment and have not been shown to actually prevent bias-motivated violence. In addition to their failure to prevent harm, many questions about enforcement and the problems of our legal systems exist. Hate crime laws strengthen and legitimize the criminal punishment system, a system that targets the very people that these laws are supposedly passed to protect. The criminal punishment system has the same biases (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia) that advocates of these laws want to eliminate. This is no small point, given the rapid growth of the U.S. criminal system in the last few decades and the gender, race, and ability disparities in criminal enforcement.
>
> In the context of mass imprisonment and rapid prison growth targeting traditionally oppressed groups, what does it mean to use criminal punishment-enhancing laws to purportedly address oppression? This point has been made especially forcefully by critics who note the origins of the contemporary gay and lesbian rights formation in anti-police activism of the 1960s and 70s and question how we came to be aligned with a "law and order" approach. Could the veterans of the Stonewall and Compton's Cafeteria riots against police violence have guessed that a few decades later LGBTQ law reformers would be pushing forward the Matthew Shepard Law Enforcement Enhancement Act to give $10 million to enhance police and prosecutorial resources? [5]

Going a step further, Gender JUST, a Chicago-based grassroots organization of LGBTQA[6] activists, has produced a truly intersectional analysis of the violence targeting queer youth and youth of color in Chicago. Their statement on youth violence refuses to accept the individualistic approach to bullying and violence prescribed by government officials and certain leaders in the LGBTQ community. We quote from it at some length:

> First off, we would like to note that what we have seen of late is an increase in the reporting and discussion of school violence—not an increase in the violence itself. Young people of color face violence consistently. As queer and transgender youth of color in public schools, violence is a reality we live daily in our schools, on our streets, in our communities, and in our lives. Whether the violence is self-inflicted, gang-based, based on pure hate and ignorance, or the systemic violence perpetrated by the state and our institutions such as our schools, police, welfare system, nonprofits, and hospitals, we need to have an ongoing analysis of violence that lasts longer than our brief memory of the deaths of a select grouping of queer youth.

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> It is critical to remember that we face violence as youth, as people of color, as people living in poverty, as queers, as trans and gender nonconforming young people. We can't separate our identities and any approach to preventing violence must be holistic and incorporate our whole selves. We have seen an overly simplistic and broad-stroke reaction to the recent violence; from Dan Savage telling young people to wait it out until "it gets better" and from Kathy Griffin declaring that passing Gay Marriage and overturning Don't Ask Don't Tell would somehow stop the violence in our lives, we have found this response to be as misguided, irrelevant, and as offensive as the conservative LGBT Movement itself.
>
> While youth violence is a very serious issue, the real bullies we face in our schools take the form of systemic violence perpetrated by the school system itself: sex education that ignores queer youth and a curriculum that denies our history, a militarized school district with cops in our schools, a process of privatization which displaces us, increasing class sizes which undermine our education and safety. The national calls to end the violence against queer youth completely ignore the most violent nature of our educational experience.
>
> Our greatest concern is that there is a resounding demand for increased violence as a reaction, in the form of hate crime penalties which bolster the prison-industrial complex and anti-bullying measures which open the door to zero-tolerance policies and reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline. At Gender JUST, we call for a transformative and restorative response that seeks solutions to the underlying issues, takes into account the circumstances surrounding violence, and works to change the very culture of our schools and communities.[7]

This Gender JUST response provided the necessary intervention into my analysis of Derrion Albert. I needed to make him a central part of the queer movement, rather than a queer subject. My instinct was to say and do something about the deaths of Derrion Albert, Sakia Gunn, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, Oscar Grant, and numerous others. Some were explicitly queer and others not, but all had died at the hands of systemic violence and were an essential part of any project meant to revive or reconnect to movements of liberation.

Any interrogation and radicalization of our notions of queer politics must look at young queer activists worldwide who are defining their immigration rights work (courageous and dangerous work) in broader, radical terms, "coming out" as both queer and undocumented. Young, queer dream activists are queering ethnic studies, or making racialized people the subjects of queer analysis, which complicates, expands, and emboldens our analysis and hopefully our praxis. Familiar tensions emerge in their goals, namely reform versus transformation. Many of us worry about how dream

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activists deploy the framework of the deserving citizen and their seeming embrace of the military to establish their respectability. There is concern that implementing the Dream Act may provide only limited immigration reform for individuals meeting the criteria, while splitting up families in some cases. For undocumented individuals and communities that embrace a strategy of normalization—the trope of the good citizen—there is some immediate relief from the threat of deportation. Such an improvement in their lives should not be minimized. Yet, the normalizing project of queer theory must undress the contradictory relationship of marginalized folks, often communities of color, toward normalization. What is desired and strategically deployed can also become a tool of regulation and control against us.

Despite these contradictions, I have watched in awe as increasing numbers of students, many of them students of color, have transformed what they learned in Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and African-American Studies classes, giving new life to our theories, books, and projects. They have used this knowledge in campaigns to change the lives of real people. The necessary translation efforts needed to make intellectual work relevant and refined for everyday struggles is underway, but neither the tenured faculty nor endowed centers of study are doing it. Instead, our students, who believe that communities outside the academy should be their point of reference, are carrying out that task.

Young people and others who found refuge in ethnic studies and queer theory are building an analysis and practice that makes visible the transformative and liberatory potential of a race-based queer politics. In organizations such as Queers for Economic Justice, FIERCE, and Gender JUST, one finds a language that gestures toward the academy, but is fundamentally rooted in the lived reality of young queers of color. This demands an intersectional approach that pushes far beyond bullying, marriage, and the military.

As a political scientist, one of the most exciting elements of the queering of ethnic studies is its potential to generate a frame of analysis rooted in a politics that reaches beyond the academy. The queer politics I adhere to springs from the lives of people of color and disrupts the subjectless, post-identity normative lens of queer theory. It grounds our work squarely in the lives of folks of color who are clearly not subjectless, but instead are subjected to the post-identity veneer of white supremacy. Though its politics reach beyond the academy, those of us in the academy may contribute to the project of building a new, active, and transformative queer politics by creating and protecting spaces where liberatory thought, discourse, and action can be explored and rehearsed. What was once, at least in part, a liberatory gay movement committed to the transformation of political institutions such as marriage and the military can now be rescued from the grips of its current neoliberal agenda. The focus on integration into state-controlled institutions such as marriage and the military represents the kind of queer or LGBTQ liberalism denoted by David Eng.[8]

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It may be possible to build a field of analysis and praxis that can help to transform the academy and perhaps the country. At our disposal are theoretical insights into the construction, deconstruction, and malleability of identities, work on the processes of normalization in queer theory, and the detailed understanding produced in ethnic studies and by feminists of color on power as it is structured around and through the axes of race, gender, and class.

NOTES

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.
2. Tera Williams, "Mom of Teen Who Was Beaten to Death Speaks Out," *MyFoxChicago* (September 26, 2009), at *www.myfoxchicago.com/dpp/news/metro/derrion_albert_mom*.
3. The discussion of Derrion Albert's murder comes from *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and Future of American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
4. See *www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2O6x7gVxrw*.
5. Dean Spade, *Keynote Address: Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape* (Revolutionary Rumors Press, 2008).
6. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied.
7. At *www.genderjust.org/news/1010statement* .
8. David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

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